Lafayette Historical Society **NEWS** Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California | July 2012 | Vol. 40, No. 3

Join us on April 18 for a special presentation in the Library & Learning Center

Lafayette Historical Society's Speaker Series

Nevada's Famous Virginia & Truckee Railroad: 140+ Years Old & Coming Back to Life

Wednesday, **July 18th** *~ 3:00 p.m.*

Speaker: **Stephen E. Drew**, retired Chief Curator of the California State Railroad Museum in Old Sacramento

Arts and Science Room *(Mezzanine Level)*

Lafayette Library *and* Learning Center • ***Limited seating***

Donation requested – **$10** LHS Members; **$15** for Non-Members
Kids under 14 ***free*** with paying adult

Mr. Drew's talk will trace the history of one of America's richest short line railroads which operated between *Reno, Carson City, and the Nevada Comstock Lode* at *Virginia City*. After 80 years of operation, the last train ran on **May 31, 1950**. But in **1976**, Orinda resident **Robert C. Gray** began bringing the **Bonanza Railroad** "back to life!"

A well regarded railroad historian, **Stephen Drew** recently retired after 35 years as ***Chief Curator of*** **the California State Railroad Museum** in *Old Sacramento*--America's premier interpretive railroad museum. He has been researching the **V&T** for more than 45 years. Two of his recent books are the 117-page "**Virginia & Truckee Inyo: Nevada's 'Brass Betsy'**" published in 2010, and the 50-page "**Official Guidebook of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad: Virginia City to Gold Hill to Carson City, Nevada. Your Personal Onboard Travel Guide to the V&T**" which was published last year. Both books are sold by the ***Nevada State Railroad Museum*** in *Carson City* and elsewhere.

This talk will be accompanied by a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation. We hope that ***V&T President and General Manager*** **Robert C. Gray** will be in attendance for the program.

For more information or reservations please contact LHS by phone at:
(925) 283-1848; or email at ***Lafayette.history@comcast.net***

President's Message

Thanks and welcome to those of you who have recently joined the **Historical Society**. We hope you will enjoy receiving our newsletter and will plan to attend our upcoming programs. Should you have comments or suggestions to send our way please contact us at lafayette.history@comcast.net.

Speaking of programs….we are appreciative of those people who have entertained our members with extraordinary programs in the last few months: **Michelle Chan** for her *walking tour of downtown Lafayette* in April and **Mary Volmer** for her talk on early California women at our *annual Pot Luck* in May. **Ms. Volmer** has shared her suggested reading list. Look for it on the last page of this newsletter.

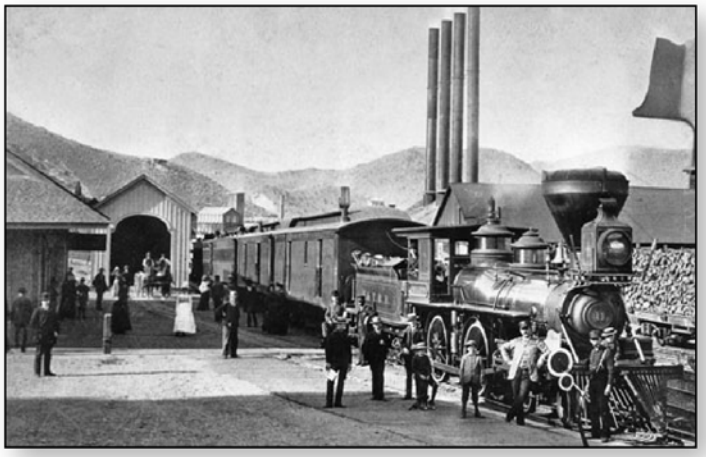
Attendees hear Michelle Chan discuss the Pony Express Marker.

Please plan to join us on **July 18** for a presentation by **Stephen Drew** on the **Virginia & Truckee Railroad**. And speaking of trains…. don't miss the exhibit at the **Contra Costa County Historical Society** in Martinez: **Before BART: Electric Railroads Link Contra Costa County** which ends on **July 12**. For additional information and hours: **www.cocohistory.com**.

Summer would be a great time to visit the **History Room** (with children or grandchildren)….there are *photos to see, neighborhoods to learn about, displays to view and t-shirts, note cards and postcards to purchase, and books for vacation reading.* And be sure to look for town founder **Elam Brown's Bible** on display soon upstairs in the display case on the Library main floor. This historic artifact is on loan from the ***Contra Costa Historical Society*** and will help kick-off our latest series of displays on the Neighborhoods of Lafayette. We hope you'll make your summer an historical one. The **History Room** is open ***Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday*** from *10:00 am until 2:00 pm*.

—Mary McCosker

Virginia & Truckee Railroad Rolls Again



Virginia and Truckee Railroad in its Heyday

Stephen Drew is passionate about railroads and about the ***Virginia & Truckee*** short line railroad in particular, which is only natural since he recently retired after 35 years as **Chief Curator of the California State Railroad Museum** in Old Sacramento.

On *Wednesday,* **July 18** at *3 p.m.* the **Lafayette Historical Society Speaker's Series** offers the chance to hear **Mr. Drew** trace the history of what he calls "one of America's richest short line railroads." "A short line," he explains is "not a main line railroad and runs 100 miles or less."

The ***V&T*** operated between Reno, Carson City and the Nevada Comstock Lode at Virginia City for more than 80 years. Incorporated on **March 5, 1868**, the first train ran in **1869**. Drew says, "The V&T literally pulled the weight of all its tracks and cars in gold and silver bullion." He promises one thing his speech will not include "are a lot of technical, uninteresting specifications" but instead will be something everyone in the family can enjoy, highlighted with a photo display.

In **1976** the ***V&T*** was reborn. **Drew** credits Orinda residents **Robert** *and* **Ardelle Gray** for their "perseverance and energy. Before then, many organizations were interested in getting the ***V&T*** running again, but the **Grays** were the only ones who succeeded."

Bob Gray has a life-long love of railroads, beginning when he worked on a section gang for the ***Southern Pacific Railroad*** as a young man in Oregon. He was in Carson City, Nevada on business in **1971** when a friend told him about a group that wanted to rebuild the **V&T**. At that time there was nothing left of the line but an abandoned right of way. Bob got interested, and after the group's efforts failed he set about restoring the line on his own, acquiring 61 parcels of land then finding the historic rail cars.

In **1976** the line made its inaugural run and by **1991** the track was extended to Gold Hill. Over time Bob acquired three locomotives, two steam and one diesel. Today the line encompasses approximately 12.5 miles from Virginia City to Carson City.

Bob's son, **Tom Gray**, manages the railroad. At its height, 70,000 people rode the ***V&T*** each year. Today's ridership is around 40,000.

Stephen Drew, who researched the ***V&T*** for the last 45 years, also has railroads in his blood. "It must have started with that *Lionel train* I found under the Christmas tree when I was a kid," he says with a chuckle. After graduating from ***UC Berkeley*** where he majored in music and history, Drew was on the staff of the **Bancroft Library** for five years, where he handled Nevada transportation and first discovered the then-defunct ***V&T***.

He served as a consultant to the ***Nevada State Railroad Museum***, and when the newly organized ***California State Railroad Museum*** was ready to hire its first curator, they contacted him. **Drew**, who retired as *Chief Curator* in 2009, has written three books on railroads, including "**Virginia & Truckee Inyo: Nevada's Brass Betsy**" and the "**Official Guidebook of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad.**"

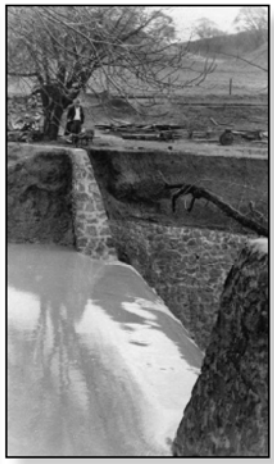
—Julie Sullivan

A Dam Club in Lafayette?

An inquiring Lafayette resident recently dropped into the historical society with the closest we've ever gotten to an aquatic engineering question: ***when was the Weir at the end of 4th Street built and why?***

Luckily for our curious visitor, the *weir at 4th street* not only has a story, it has a partner at Victoria Court. Weirs, which are a variety of dam, are built to alter or regulate the flow of rivers and creeks. In this case, the two weirs in Lafayette came into being after two very wet winters in 1938 *and* 1939. Log jams caused by tumbling black walnut trees widened the course of the creek, and land on both sides was reclaimed by water. ***Something had to be done!***

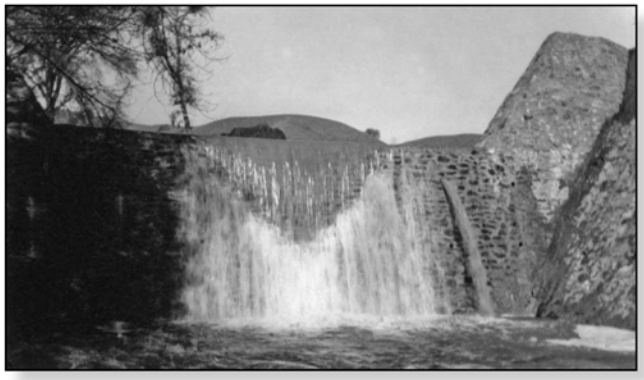
The flooding got so bad that the *bridge at Moraga Blvd and 4th Street* had to be re-built by the city in order to prevent its demise. With rising water the county quickly realized a *weir at 4th Street* would be a good solution to moderating the creek in the long term.



Some local residents that lived in the **Lafayette Manor Tract** just down the creek near Victoria Avenue got wind of this and formed the ***Las Trampas Dam Club*** in 1940 to advocate for a second weir near Victoria Court. ***The Dam Club*** was motivated with good reason: rising water had encroached on several owners properties, sometimes even coming up onto the back porch of hapless residents.

Meeting in **Earl Wise's** garage, the club had 5 members; **Geo. Williams, Mr. Van Es, Bud Blamy, George Gelhaus** and of course, the owner of the *'clubhouse,'* **Earl Wise**. Each member donated *$300 each* to make the *second weir*, and the solicited nearby residents for donations and pledges for the betterment of the community.

With money under their belt, the group shopped for materials, hired government engineer surveyors to make plans, and petitioned the county. By winter 1941 the two weirs were under construction, with the county graciously furnishing the labor for the *Victoria Court weir.* Interestingly, most of the materials of the weir were local, with rock purchased from Clayton, and cement from ***Burt & Lloyd*** in Lafayette.



The impressive structures were built and completed by the next wet winter, where they proved their merit in protecting life and property in the area. ***Both weirs still stand, regulating the creek and preventing any residents from getting a backyard swimming pool they had not counted on!***

The complete accounts of the activities of the ***Las Trampas Creek Dam Club*** dated December 20, 1940 as well as many photos of the building of the weir are available in the *Historical Society's* archives.

—Amanda Berkson-Brand

Pleasant Hill Annexed to Lafayette!

1934 view of Pleasant Hill from the bottom. Photo courtesy of Pleasant Hill Historical Society

The dirty deed actually happened on **November 24, 1980**. Thirty-one years ago. And Pleasant Hill has been part of Lafayette ever since. ***Don't believe it?*** *City Resolution Number 40-80.* Look it up.

The story begins back in **1821**, coincidentally the same year Mexico declared her independence from Spain. A British ship named ***Lady Blackwood*** slipped into *Bodega Bay*, which was, of course, Mexican territory at the time. A young sailor named **William Welch** perhaps thought the green hills looked a bit like his native Ireland, or he might simply have decided to seek his fortune. In any case, he jumped ship and took a launch to the nearby village of *Yerba Buena*. But that collection of raw shacks held little appeal. He pressed on to the south, all the way to *Pueblo de los Ángeles*.

On arrival at the great *Pueblo*, he must have wondered why anyone would build a city in a desert. Nevertheless, he stayed two years before heading back north.

He halted at the *Pueblo de San José*, where he learned that the Mexican government, anxious to populate this vast new land with settlers, was ***actually giving away vast tracts of land for nothing!*** Now twenty-eight years old, he decided it was time to become a Land Baron.

But they told him, "You must be Mexican to own land." He applied for Mexican citizenship. And was told, "You must be Catholic to be Mexican." He went to the mission. "You will need to be baptized," the priest said. "And take a Mexican name."

He mixed a good Mexican name with a good Irish one: **Guillermo Welch**.

Then he found that if he *really, really* wanted the Governor to grant *(give)* him some land, it would be much easier if he first became a soldier. "You see," they told him, "the government has no money to pay the soldiers. It gives them land, instead." So he went to the Presidio. The *Commandante* eyed the fair-skinned European named **Guillermo** with the peculiar accent and made him a *sargento* on the spot.

In 1828, history records that the ***Sargento* Guillermo**, now a wily Irish-Mexican, accumulated a herd of cattle. But a fellow with a herd of cattle must have a place to keep his herd of cattle. **Guillermo** petitioned ***Governor* Echeandia** for a nice tract of land called ***La Laguna de los Bolbones***, in the *Contra Costa*. In **1832**, having not heard back from the Governor for four years, he asked for, and received, permission from the local Alcalde and from ***Capitàn* Arguello** to move his cattle to the new location.

Wrong move. When the cattle arrived, ***Señor* José Ygnacio Sibrian y Pacheco**, ***(the local Alcalde)***, discovered that the cattle were now pastured on ***Monte del Diablo***, a tract of land ***Señor* Pacheco** himself had already petitioned for!!

***Señor* Pacheco** at once protested to the Governor, who reprimanded ***Capitàn* Arguello**. He fined **Guillermo** 50 *pesos* and ordered him to remove the cattle. Fortunately, **Ignacio Martinez**, the owner of the nearby *Rancho el*

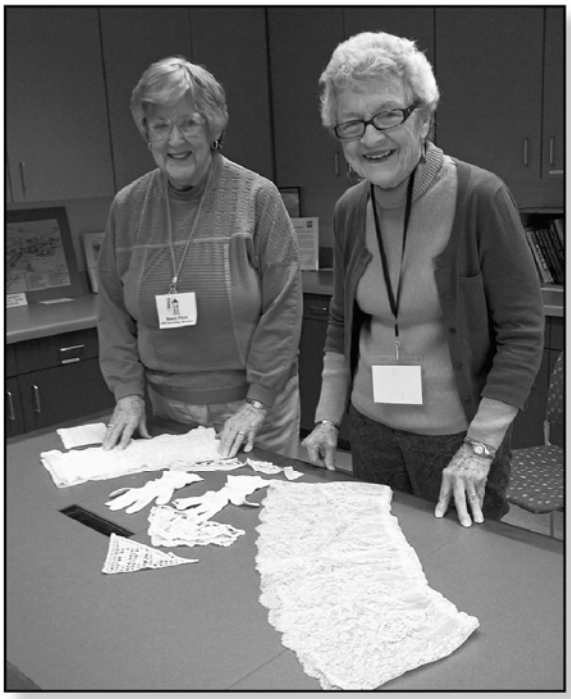
—Continued on Page 7

Meet Our Board and Volunteers

(First a Mea Culpa from the editor: this important part of our April Newsletter was not submitted to the publisher by the editor, who expresses apologies to our readers and more importantly the subjects of this article for the oversight.)

Nancy Flood, *Board Member*

Nancy is a local gal having grown up in Lafayette. She attended Lafayette Elementary School and Acalanes before receiving her college degree and teaching credential from San Francisco State. Before her retirement she taught Kindergarten at Burton School and Montecito School (both now closed) and then at Springhill School until her retirement.



Nancy Flood and Sande Hubbs

Nancy is from two local historical families, the Lamps and the Floods. The Lamps arrived from Germany in the 1850's, living first in San Francisco, then in Moraga, before settling in Lafayette. Nancy's great-grandfather, Philip Lamp, built a hotel in Lafayette on the site of the current Wells Fargo Bank (on the corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Rd.). He rented out the property and the family lived in the hotel. The Floods came from Ireland and lived in the Bay Area before purchasing property in Happy Valley off Los Arabis Drive. Jennie Bickerstaff was Nancy's grandmother's teacher.

Nancy and her Aunt Genevieve were asked to become members of the Lafayette Historical Society at its inception in the early 1960's. Nancy has been on the Board off and on since then. She has served as Vice President and is currently the Secretary of the Board.

She is constantly intrigued with local history and is excited about the space our society now occupies allowing the community to learn of its history.

Sande Hubbs, *Volunteer*

Sande has lived in Lafayette off and on since the 1930's. She attended Lafayette Elementary School in the 5th grade and then moved to Los Angeles with her parents. They returned to Lafayette in 1947 and purchased property on Upper Happy Valley Road from Robert McNeil who owned and ran the Pioneer Market. Sande lives in that same historic house today.

After college at UC Berkeley, Sande worked as a nurse. She then left Lafayette and purchased a bed and breakfast in Ione in the Gold Country. That house was built in about 1863. Sande moved back to Lafayette in the 1980's to be near her mother who lived to be 100 years old.

She is a great addition to our volunteer staff in the History Room and is currently organizing archival files. Visit the History Room on any Tuesday afternoon to visit with both Sande and Nancy for a bit of Lafayette History!

—Mary McCosker

Pleasant Hill Annexed to Lafayette!

Continued from Page 5

el Pinole, took pity on the unfortunate Irish-Mexican and allowed him to keep the herd temporarily on his *Rancho*.

While still awaiting the *Governor's* response to his petition, **Guillermo** returned to the ***Pueblo de San José,*** somehow bought a house *(remember: he's wily)*, and married **Maria Antonia Galindo**. At once, he set to work starting a family.

Many, many, times he rode the long distance between his growing herd of children in *San José* and his growing herd of cattle in *Pinole*. There was only one answer to the dilemma, he told himself: he simply must get his own *Rancho*.

Want to know how this story ends? Look for ***Part Two*** in the **October** issue of the LHS Newsletter!

—Ray Peters

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– *or* – lafayette.history@comcast.net

Mary Volmer "Women of the Gold Rush" Reading List:

- **Brands, H.W.** *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- **Clappe, Louise Amelia Knapp Smith.** *The Shirley Letters: From the California Mines, 1851-1852*.
- **Comstock, David Allan**. *Brides of the Gold Rush*. Grass Valley: Comstock Bonanza Press, 2004.
- **Egli, Ida Rae ed.** *No Rooms of Their Own: Women Writers of Early California 1848-1869*. Berkeley: Heyday, 1992.
- **Foote, Mary Hallock**. *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*. San Marino: Huntington Library, 1992
- **Holliday, J.S.** *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California*. Berkeley: University of California, 1999.
- **Johnson, Susan Lee.** *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*. New York: Norton, 2000.
- **Levy, JoAnn**. *They Saw the Elephant: Women of the California Gold Rush*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- **Levy, JoAnn.** *Unsettling the West: Eliza Farnham and Georgiana Bruce Kirby in Frontier California:* Berkeley: Heyday, 2004.
- **Royce, Sarah**. *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1932.

Return Service Requested

Lafayette Historical Society
POST OFFICE BOX 133, LAFAYETTE, CA 94549
www.LafayetteHistory.org

Lafayette Historical Society Membership Application

(Please photocopy form for additional names)

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Membership Categories and Annual Dues

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- ❑ Student Membership $10.00
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Please mail this application to:

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P.O. Box 133
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